

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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North Yemen: Odds and Ends

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Dear Peter;

My stay at Bayt al Rabu'i -- the highland village I reported on in the previous newsletter -- has been cut a bit short.

As you know, the West Germans had let me stay at their Al Boun agricultural project when I was visiting the village. A Yemeni Ministry of Agriculture official co-manages this project with the German director. I had a talk with this Yemeni official on January 29. He made it plain he didn't want me staying there anymore. He said the project was a government installation and "not a research center."

He didn't actually order me out. But he requested that I produce letters of permission from various government offices. This would have sent me off on a lengthy and probably futile paper chase. I didn't want to spend my remaining time in Yemen collecting signatures in Yemeni government offices.

I can still visit the Mudahar family in Bayt al Rabu'i. One-day excursions via taxi from Sana'a will be no problem. But I now don't have a place to stay at night for multi-day visits.

I had done nothing to anger this Yemeni official. In fact, I had made a point of keeping out of his way. But apparently, this man saw me as a potential threat. Getting rid of me was a kind of tidying-up operation.

The Yemeni Ministry of Agriculture is in the process of taking over Al Boun from the Germans. This official is in charge of the operation. Many of the Germans are unhappy about the situation. Tension between the two groups is running high.

The Yemeni takeover comes as no surprise to the Germans. The Al Boun project was established in the late 1970s on the assumption that the Yemenis would eventually assume full control. But until this particular Yemeni official came along about two months ago, the Yemenis lacked strong leadership.

Now the Yemenis have leadership and the Germans are in retreat. The bitterness comes from a clash in philosophy. The Germans and Yemenis simply don't agree on what the Al Boun project should be doing.

The Germans have been running two programs at the station. They have a team of Egyptian and Sudanese extension agents who provide advice to local farmers. They also conduct agricultural research at the station. They test new varieties of seed and fertilizer. These experiments are known as "trials."

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Because so many men are working in the Gulf countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, women in the Al Bawn region have assumed many of the heavy farm duties. This woman is operating a maharr, a device for breaking up large clods of earth.

The Yemenis have never seen the value of research, at least at this project. The Germans have another agricultural project in the south, near Taiz. If you have to do research, why not do all of it there? the Yemenis ask. The Germans point out, to no avail, that climatic conditions are different in the Taiz area. Crops suitable for Taiz are not necessarily suitable for the more arid Al Bawn.

Although they will probably keep the extension program, the Yemenis are halting agricultural research at al Boun. Instead, they are going to do what they have always wanted to do at the project -- produce high-value crops for the market to earn money for the government.

Fruit trees play a major role in this strategy. The Yemenis are busily planting various kinds of fruit trees on the land the Germans had been using for trials. The German station manager came back from his Christmas holiday in Germany to discover that the Yemenis had plowed up his potato trials.

The Germans are dubious about the fruit tree project. Fruits do command a high price in the market. But they also require intensive watering and careful cultivation. Large scale fruit tree cultivation might not be cost effective for this part of Yemen.

But the Yemenis don't have to worry too much about costs. The German taxpayer continues to foot most of the Al Boun bill.

With all this sturm und drang (storm and fury) going on at Al Boun, I was kind of a loose cannon rolling around on the deck. I am not surprised the Yemenis would want



Yahya standing next to wheat he had been harvesting with his father, Abdullah, and brothers, Mohamed and Ali. When Yahya goes to school he wears pants, a shirt, and corduroy jacket. But when he works in the fields, he usually wears traditional clothing, as here.

me out of the way.

I am now reviewing my options, trying to decide what to do next.

In the meantime, I hope this potpourri of observations will tie up some loose ends left dangling in previous reports.

I. English Lessons

It came a bit late, but I seem to have found a better method of teaching Yahya some English.

I had been working with Yahya -- the youngest son in the Mudahar family -- since the beginning of November on the English alphabet. We weren't making much progress. I knew Yahya, 15, was a bright boy. What was I doing wrong?

On January 13, I began a three-day visit to Bayt al Rabu'i. The first afternoon, I didn't try to teach Yahya much



Ali, left, and Abdullah, right, harvesting local variety wheat on a non-irrigated field. They are using a small hand-held sickle known as a mahshash to cut the wheat.

English. I had brought from Sana'a a couple of Superman comic books -- the Arabic version is printed in Lebanon -- and was curious to see his reaction.

It seems boys are the same the world over. Yahya is crazy about Superman. He used his strongest positive adjective, muntaz (beautiful), to describe the comic books. He proceeded to read each one from cover to cover.

Mohamed, an 11-year old boy who lives next door, came by after lunch. A shy boy with black curly hair, Mohamed seems to be a bit short for his age, even by Yemeni standards. For that reason, and also to differentiate him from Yahya's older brother Mohamed, I call him Mohamed Sagir (Little Mohamed).

Mohamed Sagir is in the 11th grade at the Agabat primary school. He reads quite well, as I had noticed during his frequent visits to the Mudahar mufraj. I handed him a copy of Sa'id, an Arabic children's magazine. But Mohamed showed more interest in Yahya's Superman comic books.

The next afternoon, I tried to nudge Yahya into going over some English letters. But he was in one of his periodic hyperactive moods. He could not concentrate. He and Mohamed Sagir spent most of the afternoon fooling around in the mufraj.

Yahya made a paper pinwheel and ran up and down the room with it. Mohamed worked with an old piece of carbon paper to draw a picture of a truck. The two of them engaged in a wrestling match.

Around 4 p.m., Yahya's father Abdullah poked his head in the door. Yahya had heard him coming and was pretending to study his daftar (notebook). Mohamed and I were sitting on either side of Yahya.

Abdullah sat next to Mohamed. He did not look pleased.



Yahya's oldest brother Mohamed harvesting wheat.

'Yahfham Inglizi (does he understand English)?' Abdullah asked me, nodding to Yahya.

'Swaya, swaya (some),' I replied.

Abdullah reached for a Cerelac (French powdered milk) can sitting nearby and handed it to Yahya. He told Yahya to read the label.

Yahya put on a poor performance, stumbling over most of the letters in 'Cerelac.' I was quite embarrassed.

The only thing that saved Yahya from utter humiliation was the timely appearance in the mufraj of Bushra, one of the family's young children. Bushra toddled over to us making funny noises. Abdullah played with her a bit, which took Yahya off the hook.

When Abdullah had gone, I drilled Yahya on the letters A-H. His mind was more focussed now. But he had a lot of trouble remembering 'E.' This is a typical problem for Arabs trying to learn English. Arabic has three vowel markings, but no vowel letters. Arabs tend to write English as they write Arabic -- using consonants only.

Mohamed Sagir, who was peeking over Yahya's shoulder, had an easier time remembering 'E.' When Yahya faltered, Mohamed popped in with the right answer. This was strange. I had never given Mohamed any instruction in English. But I found he could repeat A-H in the correct order, and even write most of the letters. He learned all that just by listening to Yahya and me.

That set me to thinking later that evening. Was Mohamed Sagir unusually bright, or what? It occurred to me that Mohamed was simply exercising a common Arab trait -- a good memory.

Teaching methods in the Arab world have always relied on rote memorization. In the old-style Islamic schools, students



Three Bayt al Rabu'i villagers standing in a qat terrace. They have been harvesting some leaves for personal use.

learned to recite parts of the Koran from memory.

I live near a primary school in Sana'a. Every morning, I can hear the students chanting out their lessons in singsong fashion. Maybe I should use this technique with Yahya. I had been giving him the names of the letters and their sound equivalents and expected him to work through the material on his own. Maybe I should spend more time on memory drills.

The above thoughts came to me later that evening. In the meantime, the afternoon continued on its sorry course.

After Yahya got bored with the English lessons, he and Mohamed went back to their roughhousing. I felt like a romper room monitor as I sat there and watched the two boys tumbling among the mufraj blankets and cushions.

They made an effort to be discreet. Every so often, one of them would go to the door or window and listen for Abdullah's footsteps. He was sitting in the front yard, on the other side of the mufraj's south wall, feeding a cow. He must have heard a good bit of this commotion.

It didn't make me feel any better that Yahya hit a rock while driving me back to the German project in the family's Toyota Land Cruiser truck. He was feeling very exuberant and was singing at the top of his voice. Driving even more recklessly than usual, he didn't see the large rock sitting in the dirt track.

The three of us, Yahya, Mohamed, and me, spent the next 20 minutes changing the flat tire. We were hurrying to finish before the sun went down.

I was reluctant to show up at the house the next day. Would Abdullah be irked about the ineffective English



Three girls from the village of Kawkabam, about 50 kilometers northwest of Sana'a. They are sitting next to a cistern carved out of the rock. Before diesel pumps became common in the countryside, most Yemeni villagers used these cisterns to collect rainfall for drinking and washing purposes.

lessons? Would the family blame me for the flat tire?

I needn't have worried. Everyone was as friendly and hospitable as ever the next day. But when it came time for English lessons, I was determined to exercise some discipline.

"Nadrus Inglizi (we study English)," I told Yahya after lunch. I let him know by my tone of voice that I did not mean momkin (maybe) either.

He got the message and worked hard. I drilled him on the letters using the memorization technique. Only after he had gotten the names of the letters and their sounds fixed in his mind did I have him write out the symbols.

I noticed an immediate improvement on this afternoon and during a subsequent visit. By the time of our last session, January 29, Yahya could make his way from A to Z, spoken and written letters, with few problems. He still had trouble with the vowels "I" and "U" and the consonant "M," which he confused with "N."

But he took the initiative in trying to spell out some simple English words I had taught him. I was quite pleased.

Belatedly, I have discovered that a little discipline and memory drilling goes a long way with Yahya.

Looking back over the last three months, I have to admit I haven't taught Yahya much English. He will probably forget a lot when I disappear from the scene.

But when he begins attending preparatory school (grades 7-9) in two years, Yahya should sprint past his

classmates in the English lessons.

I expect Mohamed Sagir will do pretty well also.

II. The Water Tank Problem

Mohamed, the Mudahar family's eldest son, had asked me in November for help in getting the village a water tank. Bayt al Rabu'i has a well pump, but no tank for storing the water.

Mohamed knew that the Americans built water projects in Yemen, so he asked me check with the American embassy about getting Bayt al Rabu'i a water tank.

I talked to a Yemeni official of TransCentury Corp. TransCentury is owned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and builds the USAID water projects in Yemen.

This official told me Mohamed would have to get a petition together, have the villagers sign it and then submit it to the Ministry of Public Works.

I was surprised at how fast Mohamed got moving on this. The meeting with the TransCentury official took place at the beginning of January. By the middle of the month, Mohamed had talked an Egyptian schoolteacher into writing up the petition, collected signatures from the villagers, and taken the paper to Sana'a, where he turned it over to the ministry.

All well and good -- except that he didn't follow the correct procedure.

The TransCentury official had given me detailed instructions on how to move the petition through the bureaucracy. First, it had to be signed by the head of the Local Development Association in the Amran area. The governor of Sana'a province had to sign it as well.

Once the signatures had been collected, Mohamed was to submit one copy of the petition to the ministry and one to TransCentury. If the ministry dragged its feet on the matter, TransCentury might be able to speed things up.

I explained all these points to Hussein, an English-speaking relative of Mohamed's living in Sana'a. Hussein wrote out the instructions in Arabic. I delivered the letter to Mohamed.

Something got lost in all the translating back and forth. Mohamed took the petition, without any signatures, straight to the ministry.

What happens next is anybody's guess. Paperwork has a way of disappearing into Yemeni ministries. I have heard of foreigners losing their passports in the jowazat (immigration office).

Also, it is well known that political considerations play a major role in determining which villages get which improvements.

III. Rumors of War, Part Two

Details on the North Yemeni/Saudi Arabian border skirmish that supposedly took place at the beginning of January remain elusive.

There were some wild rumors floating around Sana'a last month. People talked about hundreds of Saudi-employed Pakistani mercenaries killed and captured in the fighting.*

The Yemeni and Saudi media never said a word about any of this. But Arabic papers in Egypt and Oman apparently got wind of something going on.

Knowledgeable foreigners here are sure only that there was some sort of government to government confrontation on North Yemen's northern border, and that this involved a bit of shooting. Casualties were probably light.

Whatever actually happened, it is now clear that it blew over quickly. Neither country recalled its diplomats. There were no additional military preparations obvious in Sana'a.

North Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih and Saudi King Fahd both attended the Conference of Islamic Organizations summit in Casablanca in the middle of January.

Salih went from Casablanca to West Germany, where he was reportedly seeking treatment for some medical ailment. One can assume he would have returned home if there had been a serious border problem.

The northern border has always been a headache for the North Yemeni government. Tribes are strong in the area and the central government weak. Smuggling goods in from Saudi Arabia to avoid Yemeni import taxes is a way of life for these tribesmen.

Some tribes straddle both sides of the border, a large part of which is ill-defined anyway. Tribal disputes can easily involve people living on both sides of the frontier.

The standard "educated guess" among foreigners is that last month's skirmish began as some sort of tribal fracas. Each government then felt compelled to send in troops to protect its interests.

North Yemeni/Saudi border clashes are not entirely unexpected. Bad blood between the two countries goes back to a 1934 war when Saudi King Abdal Aziz wrested two provinces from the Yemeni imam.

But even if this memory still smolders in the Yemeni psyche, North Yemen cannot afford to tangle with the Saudis.

The Yemeni economy is supported mainly by the over \$1 billion Yemeni workers in the Gulf states send home each year. Three fourths of these approximately one million Yemeni expatriates work in Saudi Arabia.

Also, the Yemeni government would quickly totter into bankruptcy without the nearly \$100 million in annual budgetary assistance it receives from the Saudis.

The Saudis have nothing to gain from a fight with the Yemenis. The Saudis have more pressing concerns, particularly the threat posed by Iran on the other side of the Persian Gulf. The untested Saudi military would probably fare badly against the Yemenis anyway.

* The Saudi military apparently does have some Pakistani advisors.



Yemeni military helicopter flying over the rooftops of Sana'a.

The main Saudi objective in North Yemen is to maintain a buffer against the semi-Marxist regime in South Yemen. The North Yemenis have been playing that role, willingly or not. The two Yemens fought small border wars in 1972 and 1979. Border incidents continue to occur on North Yemen's southern frontier.

The North Yemeni/Saudi Arabian relationship is clearly built on a good bit of mutual need. Neither country would profit from a conflict.

Yet, large numbers of Yemenis seem convinced that the Saudis are conspiring to prevent the Yemenis from discovering oil in their country. It was inevitable that some people connected the January border skirmish with the Hunt Oil Company's announced plans to drill an \$8 million exploratory well in North Yemen's arid northeast region.*

Speculation abounds on this subject. But there are no facts to back up the conspiracy theory. Common sense argues against it.

* British Petroleum (BP) has prospecting licenses for North Yemen's Bihama plain along the Red Sea coast. But one never hears any talk in Sana'a about BP's activities.

IV. What's In a Name?

North Yemen's official name is 'Yemen Arab Republic.' It brings to my mind Voltaire's famous putdown of the Holy Roman Empire -- he said it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor even an empire.

The Yemenis aren't that bad. They've got two out of three right. The YAR is indeed Yemeni and it is Arab. But what do they mean by jumhuria (republic)?

The eastern bloc countries have their own definition of the word. But an American or western European expects a republic to contain some representative institutions.

North Yemen does have something called the al Majlis al Ta'sisi al Sha'bi (People's Constituent Assembly). But its members were all appointed by the president rather than elected. The assembly is supposed to ratify laws presented to it by the president and cabinet. But this is a mere formality.

The YAR government is essentially a marriage of military men and civilian bureaucrats.

The military is unquestionably the dominant partner. The main threat to the government is military factionalism rather than any civilian opposition. The current military president came to power after his two military predecessors were assassinated, one after another, within less than a year.

The bureaucrats have a lot of staying power, though. The military cannot rule without their technical skills.

YAR presidents reshuffle their cabinets every three years. The same people turn up again and again. The current prime minister, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, is both a former prime minister and a former second vice president.

In the Arab world, 'republic' generally designates nothing more or less than a government without a malik (king). Egypt, that monstrosity of over-centralized administration, is called the Arab Republic of Egypt.

When the North Yemenis overthrew the imam, their traditional ruler, in 1962, the Yemen Arab Republic was born.

The YAR is an enormous improvement over the imamate. The imams shut the country off from the rest of the world and ran it like a vast feudal estate. The government's property was the imam's property. The administration amounted to nothing more than a tax squeeze.

The YAR energetically provides services -- roads, water systems, hospitals, schools, etc. -- to the population. Most of these come from foreign donors. The YAR will take aid from any country that wants to provide it.

But there are similarities between the current government and the old imams.

'Before, we had one imam,' a young, western-educated Yemeni told me. 'Now, we have 100 of them.'

The YAR continues the autocratic traditions of the imamate. Just as the imam made all important decisions and listened only to a small circle of advisors, so the current government hands down directives without worrying about 'separation of powers.' The government might have lots of



A Yemeni family from Sa'dah. The man saw me walking atop the city walls and invited me over for tea.

trouble implementing its laws -- tribal authority is still strong in large parts of the country -- but there are no institutions or organized political groups to question them.

Some of the military officers who worked to overthrow the imam in 1962 had progressive ideals. A slight patina of revolutionary idealism continues to color the image of the YAR government. A government tourist brochure informs foreigners that North Yemen's governmental system is "republican, democratic, and cooperative."

But the 1970 compromise that ended the civil war brought the royalist sheikhs and traditionalists back into the government. The YAR radicals lost out in the power struggle and were either killed or fled into exile.

The present government contains both modernists and traditionalists.

In 1971, President Abdal Rahman al-Iryani appointed an al Majlis al Watanee (National Assembly) composed of military men, religious leaders, tribal sheikhs, and educated modernists -- in short, the major power groups in the country.



Despite all the changes of the last 20 years, the old Yemen lives on. This man is from Kawkabam.

This National Assembly drew up a new Constitution which strongly upheld Islamic principles. It also set up a framework for elections to a new Consultative Assembly. Elections to the Consultative Assembly were actually held in March 1971. The sheikhs and traditionalists dominated the new body.

But this Consultative Assembly seems to have played little role in the YAR government.

In 1978, President Ahmad al Gashmi handpicked the members for a new assembly, the People's Constituent Assembly. He charged the new assembly with the task of electing a president. Gashmi had taken power in a military coup and wanted to legitimize his rule. Not surprisingly the assembly elected Gashmi president.

When Gashmi was assassinated a few months later, his deputy chief of staff, Ali Abdallah Salih, took charge in Sana'a.

Salih aggressively lobbied both the assembly and the military. The assembly elected him president on 17 July, 1978 by a near-unanimous vote.

Since then, Salih has increased the assembly's size from 99 to 159 members, no doubt to put in more of his own men. But there have been no elections.

Yemeni politics took another strange turn last year when the government issued the al Mithaq al Watanee (National Covenant).

Foreigners sometimes refer to this document as 'Salih's Little Blue Book,' because of its small size, baby blue binding, and vacuous Maoist-type platitudes.

There is no English translation of the Mithaq. But foreigners who can read Arabic say it talks vaguely about achieving democracy and justice in Yemen. There are the usual bows to Islam.

It seems to be the sort of thing one really can't argue with. The trouble is that it is long on rhetoric but short on substance. There are no practical proposals for implementing democracy in North Yemen. The only concrete item in the whole document is a section forbidding unlawful police intrusion into private homes.

Foreign observers find the Mithaq puzzling. If nothing comes of it, as seems to be the case, why did the government issue it? The government does seem to want the Yemeni people to take the Mithaq seriously. The local press has proclaimed 1984 as the year North Yemen marches "from theoretical democracy to practical democracy."

That will be an enormous chasm to bridge for a country that doesn't even have any political parties.

The only effect the Mithaq has had so far is to promote interminable discussions in government offices.

This is a peculiar feature of political life in this country. Every Thursday around 11 a.m., government workers drop what they're doing and gather in a conference room in their office complex to discuss the Mithaq.

I ran into this phenomenon one morning at the jowazat.

I was beginning the process of acquiring the six signatures needed for my residence visa. I knew the immigration office was supposed to be open until 1 p.m. and arrived at 11:30. I found the officials leaving their offices. The people who had been standing in line in front of these offices were beginning to glumly drift away as well. What on earth was going on?

A Sudanese man with extensive experience of the ways of the jowazat told me the officials were heading for a room on the second floor to "discuss the Constitution." He didn't know what this Constitution was all about. But he knew the officials talked about it every Thursday morning.

He also told me that the officials usually used this as an excuse to grab a head start on the Friday weekend (Friday is the day off in Arab countries).

Refusing to give up hope, I went upstairs and stood outside the conference room. Soldiers guarded the door. Behind them I could see a large crowd of men sitting around a long table in a room enveloped in cigarette smoke. There was an excited babble of voices issuing from the room, but I could not detect any order or format to the proceedings.

The meeting broke up around 12. The Sudanese was right. The men headed for the exit doors instead of their offices. With the Sudanese's help, I did manage to intercept one official and get that first signature on my piece of paper.*

The remaining five took me the rest of the week.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

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* Signature-collecting is the salient feature of the Yemeni bureaucratic system. At the jowazat, one man signs your application, another puts a stamp in your passport, another writes in your visa number, and at least two men sign your visa. The biggest obstacle is National Security. They keep your papers for four or five days.